

northwest

Queering Local History

Archives preserved on a volunteer basis

by Sassafra Lowrey

Since 1994, Queer History Month has been celebrated in the United States every October to raise awareness of the historical significance and existence of sexual minorities and to combat the erasure of the queer experience from historical texts.

The Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest (GLAPN), a nonprofit group based in Portland also established in 1994, is committed to preserving historical records and information of the queer community in the region. Its goal is to "create a diverse, meaningful collection of artifacts and oral histories...so that future generations will have access to an awareness of our queer history," says president Christa Orth.

The GLAPN archives are housed at and property of the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) in downtown Portland's Park Blocks. GLAPN's work in recent years has, however, been significantly affected as a result of OHS losing state funding two years ago. OHS is now run solely on donations.

According to Jeff Wexler, the senior archivist of OHS, the primary impact of the funding shortfall came in the loss of staff to process the collections. "The staff members that were left had to do more jobs, and as a result of that, [we] couldn't have people dedicated specifically to processing collections."

Prior to the funding loss, OHS granted free admission to all residents of Multnomah County. The public must now pay admission to view any of the collections, including the GLAPN archives. Despite the funding problems, Wexler says OHS remains firmly committed to preserving the diversity of the human experience in the region, including that of the sexual minorities community. "GLAPN is involved in the community in Oregon and understands the nuances of that, what are the important things to be collecting and important issues to be documented."

Since the budget cuts, volunteers—now archivists—process physical documents such as letters, records and photographs into acid-free folders to prevent deterioration, organizing them in such a way that they can be accessed by researchers and members of the community. These volunteers also conduct oral history interviews with elders and others to preserve the experiences of people within the community.

"Oral history interviews really capture the thoughts and feelings on any given topic about their experience, this queer community or as a queer person that really fill in the gaps," explains Orth.

This archival preservation is detailed and time-intensive work, a great deal of which is done by Portland State University students through a partnership with GLAPN. To fulfill graduation requirements, students are required to complete a "senior capstone" to "further enhance student learning while cultivating crucial life abilities that are important both academically and professionally, establishing connections within the larger community, developing strategies for analyzing and addressing problems and working with others trained in fields different from one's own," according to the PSU Web site.

One option for students is a course titled "Preserving LGBTQ History." In this course,




GLAPN president Christa Orth views Portland's queer past.

students process collections for GLAPN prior to their donation to OHS and conduct, record and transcribe oral history interviews with members of the local community. In addition to its work with PSU, GLAPN has recently received a grant from the Chip Mayhue Memorial Fund of Equity Foundation, which has allowed GLAPN to "process more collections and gather more oral histories," says Orth.

The GLAPN archives contain a variety of items of historical significance. A current project is processing the Ann Shepherd collection, containing history of Oregon's first chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. One of GLAPN's primary goals is the preservation of the diversity of the queer community and expanding the collection.

"We want more stuff from the African-American community and the Latino and Asian Pacific Islander communities and more stuff that presents working-class culture and more stuff that represents the trans experience," says Orth. In increasing diversity, the organization also hopes to diversify the texts in the archive by the inclusion of more "personal papers."

In addition to diversifying the collection to more accurately represent the diversity of the queer community, GLAPN will be making a concerted effort to increase visibility for the organization. This community outreach will include the creation of a Web site as well as long-term goals such as "a permanent historical exhibit somewhere in the city which...gives visitors to that exhibit ideas of the importance of our queer presence," says Orth.

She adds, "The stuff that people collect and save is significant to them, and so it will be significant to future researchers and people that are interested in learning about the queer experience." She encourages people to think about preserving their experiences through a donation to GLAPN in life or as property in a will. 

For donation and volunteer information about the GAY AND LESBIAN ARCHIVES OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST contact Christa Orth at christamae@yahoo.com.

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